

SDG 4 and the ‘Education Quality Turn’: Prospects, Possibilities, and Problems

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1 Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set the scene for an ambitious development framework in a global context of widening inequalities within and between countries, global economic crises, conflict, and climate change. Building on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs propose a transformation of the existing economic, social, and environmental status quo across the world. If the ambition is taken at face value, it presents a radical political project that proposes to fundamentally alter human society by 2030 through the achievement of these goals and related targets. To achieve its ambition will require a level of political will, financing, and radical action never before seen. The consensus reached on SDG 4 reflects the value placed on education by people from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds around the globe, as well as by governments of different political persuasions. Despite the apparent consensus, tensions over quality and learning evident in the global policy formulation processes were not fully resolved in SDG 4 and have continued since the adoption of the SDGs in September 2015.

The year 2013 appears to have marked the explicit beginning of the struggle in which vision of education would prevail, with a key meeting organised by UNESCO and UNICEF held in Dakar, Senegal, and the launch of the High-Level Panel report (UN, 2013b). Between 2013 and 2015, different groups put forward their agendas; this included formal processes and extensive lobbying by a range of stakeholders. These can be categorised as two interrelated processes, the New York UN post-MDG process and the Paris post-EFA (Education for All) process. This included UNDP-led consultations on the post-2015 agenda, among which was a global on-line consultation on the ‘World We Want’ survey. These initiatives were complemented through face-to-face consultations and intergovernmental meetings such as in Dakar (2013), Muscat (2014), and Incheon (2015), as well as country-level dialogue fora ahead of the final agreement on the sustainable development agenda. The deliberations of the Open Working Group (OWG), which began its work at the Rio+20 conference (see

Chapter 2 by Antonia Wulff for details), were a major part of the process. Among the debates that characterised this process were the following:

- whether education would be a stand-alone goal;
- if it were a stand-alone goal, whether it would encapsulate a full agenda, that carried forward the broad scope of the EFA movement;
- contestation about the focus of learning and quality as well as access;
- contestation about which organisation would lead the global education agenda.

The two strands of debate and policy development – the education discussion and the UN process under the OWG – came together in the final text of the education goal. At face value, that text appears to offer a compromise between the earlier debates over quality and learning. However, a deeper reading of the text and of the global indicators for SDG 4 suggest that this is not the case. As one actor suggested, while the final SDG 4 is ambitious and there is 'beautiful language', it missed some important aspects, including any targets on financing of the education agenda (from an interview by K. Moriarty).¹

This chapter will examine the vision of education and education quality that emerges from the SDG 4 process. It will specifically explore the significance of the 'quality turn', the renewed focus on quality not only as an overarching goal but embedded in the targets. It will consider whether the broad conceptualisations of quality that emerge from SDG 4 engage with the notion of quality as a dynamic process oriented toward social justice. In particular, it will bring into focus whether the promise of 'equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all' advances social justice or whether it remains purely a symbolic policy.

The next section of the chapter discusses the methodology that underpins the analysis. This is followed by a brief contextualisation of the framing of the chapter. Subsequent sections examine SDG 4 in relation to what is meant by education quality and learning, how they are measured and some of the key conditions that are necessary for realising the global education agenda. The conclusion summarises the key arguments of the chapter.

2 Methodology

The analysis and arguments made in this chapter and our contribution to the wider debates on SDG 4 and quality are based on a view that 'not only is the world socially and historically constructed, but so are people and the knowledge they possess. We operate in and construct our world and our lives on a social, cultural and historical playing field' (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 2). We argue

that the construction of SDG 4 is not neutral; it reflects a particular global social and political context and motivations in which differing social forces seek to make and remake the world.

The data on which this chapter draws includes a detailed engagement with the content, structure, and language of the key policy texts relating to education SDG 4, its targets, and indicators. In particular we focus on the final SDG document as agreed upon at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, as well as relevant education policy texts and statements that preceded that document. We follow Rizvi and Lingard (2010), seeing policy as intertextual. Thus, the analysis of the final SDG 4 document is complemented by analysing other relevant texts that have informed its construction and additional text, such as the global indicators that have shaped its meaning ever since. This includes the UNESCO reports and position papers on education, the consultation reports and documents on education published by UNESCO and UNICEF, and those of the OWG and the 2030 Framework of Education adopted in 2015. The chapter also includes insights selected from interviews with 'policy elites' directly engaged at senior levels in formulating the education SDG goal, targets, and indicators from both governmental and nongovernmental backgrounds (Moriarty, 2019). Additionally, reflections from our own separate professional engagement in these processes have also influenced our analysis and the arguments made. Collectively these data offer us an opportunity to deconstruct the beliefs, assumptions, values, and sociopolitical dynamics that have informed the development of SDG 4.

3 Situating the Analysis: Scope and Limits of the Policy Imagination

Policy responds to the cultural, social, political, and economic norms, and, in turn, is shaped by them. Policy is developed within a particular sociopolitical and economic environment, and is the result of political pressure to convert conflict over public goods, such as education, into 'an authorised course of action concerning their allocation' (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, pp. 8, 16).

Globalised ideas and ideologies play a fundamental role in the development of policy. Lingard and Rawolle (2011) point to an emergent global education policy field, which they refer to as a 'rescaling of politics' developed out of the interaction between global and national policy fields. They conceptualise this rescaling as the relocation of political authority beyond the nation state through a 'global education policy field' (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011, p. 490). Verger, Novelli, and Altinyelken (2012) argue that globalised ideas are now dominating to the extent that it is possible to identify a convergence of national

policy directions in education that can be referred to as 'global education policy'. Robertson (2012) provides a very useful separation of the different ways in which global education policy can be understood. These include global as a condition of the world, as discourse, as project, as scale, and as reach. She considers the impact of neoliberalism and changes in technology, a particular social imaginary, as a way of framing education problems and their solutions. She cites EFA as an example, which today is replaced by SDG 4. She argues that these changes were not caused by 'a global steamroller; rather, the complex reworking, re/bordering and re/ordering of education spaces to include a range of scales of action' (Robertson, 2012, p. 18), highlighting the geographically situated nature of 'international' actors and organisations.

The idea of Westphalian sovereignty, a principle in international law whereby each nation state has exclusive sovereignty over its territory and domestic affairs, is rendered impotent in processes of policy determination by globalisation and the pervasiveness of the neoliberal economic model. Cultural theorist Mark Fisher suggested that neoliberalism is not only the dominant form of socioeconomic organisation but is in fact the only reality we can imagine (Fisher, 2009). This is the lens through which everything, including education policy, is now framed, as if this were somehow the only natural condition. There is a struggle over the control of this 'social imaginary' between 'a dominant neo-liberal imaginary underpinning educational policy' and 'a democratic alternative to it, conceived as a radically different way of interpreting the facts of global interconnectivity and interdependence' (Rizvi, 2006, p. 200). This struggle is evident in the formulation and content of SDG 4.

In undertaking this analysis, we thus conceive of policy as providing a normative framework to which the international community and nation states should aspire. Untangling the complex discourses and ideological influences shaping the policy decisions that produced SDG4 and its targets is therefore of particular importance to see how the struggles played out, not only in what was and what was not included, but in the conception of what quality education is, what it aims to do, and how it is achieved.

4 The Notion of Quality in SDG 4

There was no mention of quality education in the 1990 Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All, nor in the MDGs (World Conference on Education for All, 1990; UN, 2015a). Quality of education became a stronger focus in the EFA goals (World Education Forum, 2000). Yet the reality is that, in practice, there remained a significant gap. One of the primary reasons identified for this

is that the emphasis on access has come at the expense of quality. A major barrier to delivering quality education has been resource constraints – financial, human, and infrastructural. For example, one of the gaps in previous educational goals was the lack of focus on teachers as an important factor for quality. Not only physical access and the number of schools matter but also the quality of the teaching and what people learn (Case & Deaton, 1999; Sayed & Ahmed, 2015). Qualified and motivated teachers are key agents in improving the quality of education (for more detail, see Chapter 10 by Stephanie Bengtsson, Mamusu Kamanda, Joanne Ailwood, and Bilal Barakat).

The notion of quality education gained further policy traction in discussions of the post-2015 framework, partly due to a growing recognition of the ‘global learning crisis’ identified by UNESCO in 2013 (UNESCO, 2013c, 2014f). The recognition of a ‘learning crisis’ was accompanied by an increasing concern in some quarters that what people learn matters and growing evidence that many who access school were not actually learning (Acedo, Adams, and Popa, 2012). We will now explore the theoretical foundation of education generally and educational quality specifically before analysing how quality education is conceptualised and constructed in SDG 4 and its associated targets.

4.1 *Instrumentalist Versus Rights-Based Arguments for Education and Conceptions of Quality Education*

Competing conceptions of quality were played out before the final iteration of the SDG 4 process. They have also continued, as discussed later in this chapter, in relation to the global and thematic indicators for SDG 4 developed under the auspices of the Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) and the Technical Cooperation Group on the indicators for SDG 4, respectively.

A consistent line of criticism of the previous global education goals and the global development frameworks is that they were framed in an instrumentalist way, in which development generally and education quality more specifically were seen as a means to an end, most often growth in gross domestic product (GDP). This instrumentalist logic of education is rooted in ideas of human capital formation through education and in particular the influential analysis of ‘rates of return’ on educational investments undertaken by Psacharopoulos (1972), Mincer (1974), and McMahon and Wagner (1981). McMahon recently reiterated his assessment that not only do returns to education ‘improve the life chances of individuals over their life cycles but in the aggregate are measures of the returns to education to broader regional and national development’ (McMahon & Oketch, 2013, p. 79). These approaches stressed the economic

value of education and were heavily promoted by the World Bank. This promotion of education motivated primarily on the basis of its economic value to the individual and society has had a substantial impact on education policy and expansion. The focus on the physical access to education in the MDGs (MDG 2 in particular) was driven by the argument that this gave the best rate of return for education to governments and the global education development community. Bennell (1996a) gave a trenchant critique of the justification for primary education based on rates of returns methodology. Although a large body of literature exists that supports education's potential to create economic benefits, the question remains: Whose interest does an education policy driven by economic imperatives alone really serve?

Critics of instrumentalist arguments (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015; Acedo et al., 2012) for education quality argue that a rights-based understanding of quality is not an idealist vision of education but rather a legally binding obligation that all countries have committed themselves to through the signing of at least one international human rights convention that has a provision on the right to education (Aubry & Dorsi, 2016). Quality education is a human right, as the Committee of the Rights of Child notes in its General Comment no. 1:

Article 29 (1) not only adds to the right to education recognized in article 28 a *qualitative* dimension which reflects the rights and inherent dignity of the child; it also insists upon the need for education to be child-centered, child-friendly and empowering, and it highlights the need for educational processes to be based upon the very principles it enunciates. (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001, emphasis added)

Ignoring the right to quality education, in favour of a utilitarian model driven by a narrow rates-of-return imperative that reduces quality to literacy and numeracy, limits the ability of education to unlock a child's (or an adult's) full potential. While education can and does impact both individual income and wider economic indicators, the emphasis on the narrow instrumental value of education can be misleading as it does not necessarily end inequality. Further, such an emphasis might reinforce patterns of marginalisation for many disempowered children (Bivens, Moriarty, & Taylor, 2009). It also risks leaving groups behind or condemning them to cycles of exclusion that their families may have experienced for generations.

Viewed through a rights-based model of quality education, how and what children and adults learn is not only about content-knowledge but also about the experience they have and values of cooperation that education can help develop. Understanding rights and experiencing rights in practice in the

classroom and wider school are critical for the sustainable societies proposed in the 2030 agenda. This type of rights-based education is ‘a major building block in efforts to achieve social transformation towards rights-respecting societies and social justice’ (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2007, p. 12). For further discussion of this theme, see Chapter 13 by Joel Westheimer on citizenship education and Chapter 14 by Hiraku Komatsu, Jeremy Rappleye, and Iveta Silova on education and sustainable development.

4.2 *Unpacking Conceptions of Education Quality and Learning in the Overarching SDG Education Goal and Targets*

While the SDG agenda makes a clear and obvious commitment to quality education and learning, as reflected in the overall goal, the struggle over the operationalisation of the conception of education quality lies at the heart of the SDG 4 debates. Although there are nuances in various positions, and a possibility for achieving compromise, in essence the divide falls between a vision of quality education creating more progressive social justice and of education serving an economic imperative.

Education quality is core to the overarching SDG 4 goal and is referred to directly in three of the 10 targets. The concept is embedded in other targets, without actual use of the word. There are several challenges in how the notion of education quality is operationalised in the targets, reflecting the tension about the understandings of education outlined in the preceding section. In particular, we analyse selected targets of SDG 4, namely, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.7, and 4.c, to consider the ways in which the ‘quality turn’ in SDG 4 is – or is not – addressed, and the competing notions of access and learning.

The inclusion of the notion of lifelong education in the overarching goal is reflected in a commitment to broaden what counts as a valid education provision. This is, for example, reflected in the following early childhood education (ECE) target:

4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education. (UNGA, 2015b, p. 17)

The significance of investing in ECE, particularly for mitigating inequities, cannot be sufficiently emphasised (Heckman, 2008; Rose & Zubairi, 2017). However, this target does not include the word ‘free’, which risks leaving the most marginalised children excluded from its benefits. Currently 85% of children in low-income countries (LICs) are not accessing any form of preprimary education. There is a continuing low level of investment in this sector. LICs only

spend just over 2 US cents per day for each child on preprimary education, and education donors collectively spent only 0.6% of total aid to education on preprimary schooling between 2012 and 2015, leading to a shortage of available public places (Rose & Zubairi, 2017). This leaves a massive gap in provision, which brings an increased burden to low-income households. That is likely to mean that these children are left behind. This target risks exacerbating the increasing privatisation of ECE provision in many low-income countries and ensuring the fact that it is mainly the middle and wealthy classes that benefit from such opportunities.

The wider vision of education provision in SDG 4 is also reflected in a clear commitment to expanding the focus away from primary education to encompass both secondary and higher education, as articulated in this target:

4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university. (UNGA, 2015b, p. 17)

This reflects a clear commitment to expanding education provision. However, the risk is that targets 4.2 and 4.3 are weakly formulated and moreover tend to privilege access opportunities over meaningful epistemic access and completion. This effectively weakens the level of commitment to quality lifelong learning.

An important shift in the SDG 4 targets is toward the affective (Sayed et al., 2018). The previous MDG agenda adopted a fairly narrow and instrumentalist view of education, focussing on access to primary schooling. In SDG 4 the shift is toward learning outcomes, such as the acquisition of literacy and numeracy, as is made clear in the global indicators for Target 4.1 (see the following section). Whilst these are important, the fragile nature of nation states in the 21st century, increasing physical and symbolic violence, xenophobia, and the growing denial of the rights of groups such as LGBTIQ, migrants, and refugees have revealed a dire need for an 'affective turn' within education policies. Issues of social justice and social cohesion have taken on greater importance within the education quality agenda in recent times. An important shift in the SDG 4 targets is toward the affective (Sayed et al., 2018); however, this is only partial and poorly formulated. SDG 4 has a target on these issues:

4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace

and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. (UNGA, 2015b, p. 17)

These affective learning objectives, grouped under Target 4.7, commit the signatories to a rights-based understanding of quality and would contribute to rights-respecting societies and social justice. They offer a broader conception of education quality. This includes the concept of global citizenship, which gained prominence as the third priority of the UN Secretary General's Global Education First Initiative (GEFI). Global citizenship sets out a vision of education that moves beyond the acquisition of knowledge to empathy and action for other people and the environment (UNESCO, 2012a). However, while the broadening of the affective is important, many of the processes and documents that informed the final text of SDG 4 stress economic factors as the underpinning consideration for reaching sustainable development and an emphasis on education's role in promoting economic growth. In the articulation of the High-Level Panel report, for example, this function of education for human capital appears to sit alongside ideas of rights and citizenship for social justice. However, the role of education in economic growth is predominant. This brings to the fore the question of intention and discourse: Is the learner conceived as an 'economic global citizen' (Richardson, 2008) or a 'critical global citizen' (Andreotti, 2011), and are the two – as the polarity of the debates sometimes suggests – irreconcilable?

While the inclusion of Target 4.7 is symbolically important, it is what can be best described as a residual target, in which many of the learning needs identified by diverse stakeholder groups are lumped together. This goal has been described by one policy actor as 'too broad and too many concepts ... difficult for people to grasp, especially for politicians' (Moriarty, 2019, p. 132). This lumping together means the target is seen as too complex and is likely to be sidelined by governments as the policy is translated down to the nation level for implementation (Moriarty, 2019).

Furthermore, the learning envisaged by targets 4.1 and 4.4 (see below) is described as 'relevant', giving it increased and central value, whereas the learning outcomes listed in Target 4.7 are described as promoting and contributing to sustainable development. This suggests that they possibly add value but are not essential. The separation of the learning outcomes into two categories – 'relevant' and 'contributing' – implies that knowledge, skills, and values of human rights, gender equality, and peace are not relevant to learners worldwide. It seems that Target 4.7 was conceived of as largely symbolic and likely to be delegitimised and marginalised in its implementation, given its broad

scope and its vague and generic formulation. Of course, this cannot yet be known as national implementation of SDG 4, its monitoring, and evaluation are still in their infancy. However, as suggested in the discussion of indicators that follows, most policymakers are more likely to adopt an instrumentalist and narrow view of learning.

What is new, is a greater emphasis on skills for work and jobs, with Target 4.4 committing to 'substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship' (UNGA, 2015b, p. 17), making explicit the role of education in developing skills for work. Vocational training is mentioned in three separate SDG4 targets. In this target we again see the use of the word 'relevant', reinforcing (albeit subtly) the role of education in the creation of human capital. Such a vision of education continues to be promoted in new global measures on human capital recently announced by the World Bank, which, it has been argued, undermine SDG 4 (Edwards, D., 2018).

There are several silences in the SDG 4 framework. Some are matters of policy neglect and inattention, but others are more substantive. Among these is lack of attention to teachers – their training, their support, their working conditions. Although Target 4.c does include the important recognition that teachers must be professionally qualified, the targets do not focus on the need for having well-supported, motivated teachers whose rights and responsibilities are recognised in policies and in working conditions. In the discussion that predated the final SDG 4 framework, there was a target for teachers:

Target 6: By 2030, all governments ensure that all learners are taught by qualified, professionally-trained, motivated and well-supported teachers. (UNESCO, 2014a)

Yet disappointingly, the final SDG 4 reduces teachers and their work to the level of an input:

4.c By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States. (UNGA, 2015b, p. 17)

Addressing inequality in learning is only possible if there is equity in access, as well as teacher distribution and training. In many education systems, well-qualified and experienced teachers are clustered in schools serving the advantaged (UNESCO, 2014f). To ensure equity in learning (which, at present, is

mostly measured through testing), the target for teachers and the associated measures as proposed in various documents (Sayed & Ahmed, 2011) should also focus on equity. Learning does not occur in the absence of teachers and teaching; a commitment to equity in learning should therefore include a focus on teachers and teaching. Only through quality inputs will it be possible to have both quality outcomes. 'The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers' (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 13). There is significant evidence to support the claim that teachers are key to improving education quality and learning outcomes (UIS, 2016c). This requires teachers who are not only qualified but understand and respect human rights and who reflect the diversity of the population at large – including female teachers and teachers with disabilities. This also implies a need for attention to teacher recruitment and deployment within national education systems to ensure that it is not only wealthy and urban schools which can, and do, attract the most qualified and motivated teachers. Consequently, measures of learning should have, at their heart, the improvement of teacher pedagogy and student learning. Yet SDG 4 falls short in addressing the wider issues of teacher motivation and rights.

The operationalisation of education quality in the 10 targets is likely to lead to a narrow and instrumentalist reading of what is to be achieved, and what is desirable and meaningful, for several reasons. First, a key conceptual limitation of the SDG 4 is how learning is defined and for what purpose(s). Among the factors influencing learning and quality is the curriculum, which is not mentioned in the text of SDG 4. The assumption underpinning the notion of curricula and knowledge in SDG 4 is that national governments have curricula that are consistent with the overarching goals and learning targets. Further, the notion of knowledge and learning that is articulated in the SDG 4 framework is that of learner outcomes in literacy and numeracy at the terminal phases of primary and secondary schooling; learner readiness for schooling; digital and literacy skills; and knowledge of environmental and geoscience (see the following section). Other affective areas of knowledge are not prominent in the global indicators of SDG 4. This raises the questions of whether this can be conceived as a holistic framework of knowledge and learning in which knowledge is valued.

Second, conceiving of quality education only as relevant and effective learning outcomes, limited to the narrow conception of learning as cognitive attainment, fails to address other important aspects of quality education. One of the SDGs, Goal 16, is to 'promote peaceful and inclusive societies' (UNGA, 2015b, p. 14). Simply having a high level of literacy and numeracy will not achieve this. Education must deliver learning that is 'relevant' to the challenge

of overcoming intolerance and hatred. Failing to prioritise human rights and global citizenship as relevant and effective undermines this goal.

Finally, education quality is complex, and learning multifaceted. Quality education and learning involves many different inputs and processes, among which are the experience in the classroom, including rights-based participatory pedagogy; adequate numbers of trained teachers; the promise that children understand the language they are taught in; access to teaching and learning material that promotes diversity; a school environment that is safe and free from violence or attack; and the teaching of a broad and diverse set of knowledge and skills, along with the ability to reflect on, question, and create knowledge, rather than simply repeat it in examinations. Learning, if it is of quality, must therefore be a process, a set of skills, not measured only as definitive outcomes from standardised tests.

In summary, for the 2030 education agenda, a critical question must be whether education driven by the logic of the economy can lead to the ambitious change set out in *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UNGA, 2015b). The dominant discourses that have shaped SDG 4 may have limited its potential to contribute to a holistic vision of development from the outset. A model of education driven by a narrow and instrumentalist logic is likely to undermine an expansive view of quality education. Literacy and numeracy – the indicators for Target 4.1 – while key foundational skills, alone do not constitute a quality education. If education is not equitable, either in terms of access or in the way it is experienced, then it cannot be considered quality education. Creating equality of opportunity is not sufficient either, as challenges facing the most marginalised groups as a result of social class, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, or other identities require targeted actions by governments and their international partners.

5 Turning Targets into Indicators: The Further Narrowing of the Education Quality Agenda and the Perils of Measurement

In the previous section, we examined conceptions of education quality and learning as they are reflected in the targets. In this section, we consider how indicators and the process of their development frame the ways in which education quality might be realised in the Education 2030 global agenda. We discuss the global shared monitoring frameworks for tracking education progress as these provide a sharper focus of policymakers' priorities of what success looks like. For details of the classification, see UN (2019).

The measurement of progress for the SDGs overall will theoretically be guided by four levels of indicators: global, regional, thematic, and national. Governments will be accountable to report only on the 11 global education indicators, which represent a boiling down of priorities. The thematic indicators, although broad and comprehensive, will not require the same level of international accountability as the global indicators, and governments will choose their priorities in relation to their national context.

While the development of the SDGs, including SDG 4, was a political process, the development of the global indicators is described as a technical process led by a group of country-level experts, the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs). While the work of the group has been heavily influenced by available data, to refer to the feasibility of data collection and other methodological considerations to portray this as a merely technical process is misleading. The 'scope and wording of global indicators will, without doubt, have real political significance' (Moriarty, 2016, p. 124). As with the MDGs, what is measured and reported on will undoubtedly drive action. These are the indicators to which governments will be held accountable; they constitute an 'agenda inside the agenda'. How these decisions on global indicators were made, by whom, and on what basis requires interrogation as, notwithstanding the challenges, the indicators were not purely derived from available data. One interview informant involved in these processes parodied the discussions thus:

Oh, we can only have one global indicator for 4.1, it's going to be reading and maths as OECD would like it to be for end of lower secondary because that is what they measure. (Moriarty, 2019, p. 148)

The different levels of indicators proposed are problematic, signalling two parallel processes:

At the moment there are no global indicators on children in or out of schools or completion, no indicator on numbers of children and personally I think this is wrong, we are missing something. ... Just as we had for the SDG process this is a parallel process on the indicators, where you have the IAEG that decides on global indicators and the education community that decides on the thematic ones. (Moriarty, 2019, p. 146)

Nevertheless, each technical sector does make inputs into the IAEG-SDGs. The comment above may reflect a sense of disconnection and/or internal divisions within nation states and/or between the two processes of indicator development.

Another policy actor expressed the view that it should be 'up to national context and resources of the national governments to put in place a system for monitoring this. ... [It] will come down to local political contexts (Moriarty, 2019, p. 145).

Developing indicators is not easy as the categorisation of the indicators themselves into three tiers, based on the availability of mechanisms and data for measuring progress highlights (see Chapter 1 by Antonia Wulff for more detail). In addition to the technical challenges, decisions on what indicators are used to measure and track progress are highly political choices, determined by particular views of education's purpose, and in turn, setting the direction of education, its aims, and functions.

The indicators that have been developed have enabled the prioritisation of some agendas over others. This is perhaps most starkly illustrated by the global indicator for Target 4.1. The global indicator does not attempt to capture key aspects of the target, such as completion of a full cycle of schooling and/or the percentage of those children in free public education. The choice to measure only the 'proportion of children and young people: (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex' (IAEG-SDGs, 2016) is a means to boil down the focus of the target only to learning to read, write, and count. This removes any measure of equity based on free education – a universal human right and central to a broader conception of education quality and learning. Limiting the measurement of learning in this way produces a notion of quantitative effectiveness, which relies on test results to verify effectiveness and quality (Bivens et al., 2009). Such a technicist approach runs the risk of losing sight of the idea that improving learning does not come about by assessment per se or by the frequency of assessment (Sayed & Kanjee, 2013). Children do not learn simply because they are assessed. They learn if assessment information results in changes and improvements in pedagogy. Measurement thus has limited policy purchase if it does not result in improvements in classroom practice. There is also a danger that, in stressing learning outcomes, teachers' professionalism is undermined by the highly structured learning that such an emphasis on testing often brings. Moreover, test results themselves do not necessarily reflect observed learning outcomes among students (Goldstein, 2004). A key problem with these sets of global indicators is that they do not deal with pedagogy and learning adequately. An exception may be the mainstreaming of the themes of Target 4.7, which are the heart of education quality.

Both the global and thematic indicators have a narrow and reductionist view of learning and pedagogy. For example, the thematic indicators for knowledge, skills, and learning readiness reduce these to the following:

1. Readiness: stimulating home learning environment.
2. Skills: digital literacy.
3. Knowledge: environmental science and geoscience.

Alexander (2015, p. 257) has concerns about how education quality and learning are understood. He states:

Education for the period post-2015 needs a radical and properly informed debate about indicators and measures in relation to the black box, or black hole, of teaching and learning, for classrooms are the true front line in the quest for educational quality. The proper sequence, surely, is not to make do with the odd measure that happens to have featured in a number of school effectiveness studies but to start with a rounded account of the educational process and the purposes it serves, then range comprehensively and eclectically across the full spectrum of relevant research and extrapolate what the evidence shows can safely be regarded as key indicators of quality, and only then proceed to the question of how those indicators that have been shown to have pre-eminent influence on the quality and outcomes of learning can be translated into measures.

Alexander (2015, p. 257) goes on to caution against 'a single global measure of the quality of teaching applied across all cultural and pedagogical contexts'. On the other hand, the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity (Education Commission), established after the adoption of SDG 4 and reflecting a great diversity of actors, argued that 'to galvanize attention globally, a single global indicator of learning should be agreed on to complement national measures of learning' (Education Commission, 2016, p. 17).

Reflecting on the process of developing indicators, a senior policy actor interviewed by one of the authors of this chapter made a thoughtful observation: Those who felt that the overarching goal was too broad, and that it required a narrower learning goal, argued that this was achieved through the global indicator process, as 'certain groups didn't get the targets they wanted then they pushed for the indicators to pick the part of the target they want' (Moriarty, 2019, p. 149). Although that view could be regarded as partial, it expresses the sentiment that the choice of indicators was both highly political and hotly contested, especially over what quality education means in practice.

Measurement and assessment constitute a large global industry and perhaps the largest global market in education after textbook production. The assessment and measuring required to monitor progress in SDG 4 are likely to stimulate that industry. This begs the question of who controls the testing

market and who stands to gain from an increased focus on the assessment of learning. It would, indeed, be unfortunate if the SDG 4 education agenda focussing on learning and its measurement created a scramble for market shares and deliberately or unwittingly intensified the current privatisation of assessment and testing.

Indicators, including the global indicators, are designed as measures of accountability. Such frameworks require the confidence and trust of those who are implementing them. National governments and, more fundamentally, teachers and schools should therefore be in the driver's seat in developing measures of accountability that are politically acceptable, professionally sound, and administratively manageable. However, as we noted previously, discussion about indicator development and measurement has been largely treated as a technical exercise and thus avoided discussion about the politics of measurement: who sets the agenda, who monitors, who collects data, who interprets the data, who is to be held accountable and for what. Neglecting such considerations runs the risk of disempowering national education actors (state and nonstate) and citizens who should, in the final instance, be leading the agenda. After all, policy traction and accountability provided by global targets only work if national governments use the information from monitoring progress to put in place education policy reforms to improve education quality.

Understandably, international agencies – and by implication, the national governments with whom they work – have a need to focus on clear, reliable, and measurable targets and indicators to measure learning. Parents and students alike also place value, for a variety of reasons, on measuring progress. This might be because of an understanding of education qualifications as a 'positional good' (Hirsch, 1977) or due to a more comprehensive understanding of the value that formative assessment can provide. But there is a real risk that the SDG 4 notion of learning is being narrowed and, like the MDG access agenda, becomes no more than a quest for quantitative measures to show progress. According to Bivens et al. (2009, p. 100), this 'narrow orientation of education towards the cognitive, the behavioural and ultimately the economic, manifested through over-reliance on testing and measurement, is disabling its potential to bring about significant change within individuals and within society more widely'.

While SDG 4 in many ways embraces a more expansive education vision than did the MDGs, it remains limited within the confines of a social imaginary that perceives education as a vehicle for economic ends and imposes considerable data burdens on national governments. Moreover, the process of developing indicators reflects a false technicist approach that removes ownership from

those who will be required to implement this ambitious agenda. The control of the indicator development agenda is likely to result in a process of monitoring and tracking progress that is outside the ownership of national governments.

6 The Challenge of Realising the Ambitious Global Education Agenda

The SDGs in general and SDG 4 in particular, unlike the previous global agenda, include a focus on implementation. SDG 4 contains targets (4.a, 4.b and 4.c), which are referred to as means of implementation (MOI). We have already referred to one of these relating to teachers in a previous section. In this section, we focus on Target 4.b and more generally the issue of financing, which we consider critical to support quality. We also discuss who or which organisation is to be held accountable for monitoring progress, as well as several conditions necessary for the attainment of SDG 4 and its 10 associated targets.

There is little attention devoted in the SDG 4 text to the international architecture for delivering and managing the process, except for the three 'means of implementation' targets. In particular, there is a remarkable silence about how this agenda is to be financed. The Education 2030 Framework for Action does offer this statement of intent:

We emphasize that international public finance plays an important role in complementing the efforts of countries to mobilize public resources domestically, especially in the poorest and most vulnerable countries with limited domestic resources. An important use of international public finance, including official development assistance (ODA), is to catalyse additional resource mobilization from other sources, public and private. ODA providers reaffirm their respective commitments, including the commitment by many developed countries to achieve the target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income for official development assistance (ODA/GNI) to developing countries and 0.15 per cent to 0.2 per cent of ODA/GNI to least developed countries. (WEF, 2015, para. 43)

Despite strong advocacy leading up to the adoption of the SDG framework, there is no specific target or goal relating to financing SDG 4, unlike the EFA framework for action, which stated that 'no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by a lack of resources' (WEF, 2000, p. 9). This omission speaks volumes about the

declining commitment of the international community, which has driven the SDG process, to support national governments in achieving the goals and targets set.

The financing aspects of the sustainable development agenda were dealt with separately in the *Addis Ababa Action Agenda*, adopted shortly before the SDGs themselves in 2015 (UNGA, 2015a). Some may argue that SDG 4 did not need a target on financing, although the Addis Agenda contains very limited financing commitments to education. This however, is not the whole story. SDG Target 3.c, one of the health goals' MOI targets, does call on governments to 'substantially increase health financing' (UNGA, 2015b, p. 17).

The only references to financing education are in the MOI targets 4.b and 4.c, which refer to scholarships for higher education and financial support for teacher training. They fall short of a more robust commitment to education financing targets. They also ignore the call by the African Union for a specific higher education/university target, as opposed to scholarships, for higher education (Sayed & Ahmed, 2011).

The Education 2030 Framework for Action, adopted after the final SDG 4 text, does seek to address this weakness, and the World Education Forum in May 2015 also highlighted the need for education finance (World Education Forum, 2015). However, the absence of a financing target in SDG 4 can arguably be read alongside a policy discourse in the SDG framework as a whole, which constructs a positive role for the private sector in delivering public goods, from contributing resources to direct delivery. In its construction, the SDG policy framework intentionally or inadvertently elevates the private sector as an equal partner and stakeholder in realising and protecting human rights. The question that must be asked is whether the self-interest and utility-maximising behaviour of the private sector can be harnessed to the benefit of the public sector.

A key policy text, which provides guidance for the implementation of SDG 4 is the *Education 2030 Framework for Action*. That document spells out various approaches and strategies for implementing SDG 4. The Incheon Declaration, which promulgated the Framework for Action, states:

We reaffirm that the fundamental responsibility for successfully implementing this agenda lies with governments. We are determined to establish legal and policy frameworks that promote accountability and transparency as well as participatory governance and coordinated partnerships at all levels and across sectors, and to uphold the right to participation of all stakeholders. (World Education Forum, 2015, p. 9)

While laying the central responsibility for accountability at the foot of government, it does beg the question of what the role of the various sectors and actors, including international agencies, is in monitoring progress. It leaves vague how different actors will be held to account and by whom.

Finally, the realisation of this education agenda requires an approach to implementation that emphasises historic and structural inequities in promoting education quality. SDG 4 discourse, which brings both education quality and equity to the fore, must be buttressed at the level of implementation by political will and financial investments.

7 Conclusion

This chapter focussed on how the global education agenda articulated in SDG 4 reflects education quality and learning. We have argued that this turn to education quality, while echoing earlier global agendas, represents a shift in focus and attention to learning as opposed to access to education.

We have pointed to some of the key conceptual limitations of how education quality is conceived in the SDG 4 goal and embedded in the 10 associated targets. In particular this chapter emphasises that the concept of quality education and learning is narrowed and reduced in instrumental ways that reduce its potential reach and impact. We argue that while a shift to the 'affective' is marked by the inclusion of Target 4.7, the lumping together of so many topics renders it inoperative, with the risk that it becomes a residual target. The failure to describe the learning in Target 4.7 as relevant or effective creates a hierarchy of learning, where human rights education – a legal obligation – is seen as less important than other areas. We argue that in SDG 4, the neglect of curricula and inclusion of teachers in the framework as a 'technical education input' reduces their agency and limits the potential of the 'quality turn'.

SDG 4 and its targets lead to a form of pseudo-technicism whereby a narrow set of indicators are axiomatically assumed to measure equitable and quality lifelong learning for all. In so doing, rights-based understandings of quality, including inclusive and child-centred pedagogy, interactive teaching and learning processes in the classroom, a curriculum that encourages critical thinking, and respect for and understanding of human rights, which many observers, including the authors, feel better measure quality and learning, are marginalised and delegitimised. Education quality is discursively constituted as instrumental and, once again, devoid of any understanding of the teaching and learning process.

Despite our critique, we do believe that the insertion of equity and education quality in the global development goals represents a welcome change in the global agenda and a sober response to a narrow focus on physical access that characterised the previous MDGs. However, for the 'quality turn' to be realised in practice, a set of necessary conditions is required that acknowledges a vision of education quality in which the focus on the affective is valued along with the cognitive. This education quality turn implies rethinking the indicators and refining the targets at the level of implementation such that a holistic, reflexive, and critical vision of education is promoted. Further this necessitates an approach to education financing and accountability that privileges the need of the poor and marginalised through quality public education. Such a vision of education is consistent with a rights-based approach to implementing SDG 4 (Moriarty, 2017). Only in this way can the 5P mantra of *People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership*, articulated in the wider 2030 agenda for sustainable development, be realised. And only in fully embracing a rights-based vision of the 'quality turn' can SDG 4 contribute to social justice and redistribution of privilege and wealth in and through education. Without such a vision, the ideal of 'equitable and quality lifelong learning for all' will remain illusory and unattainable.

Note

- 1 This chapter draws on doctoral research of one of the authors.